

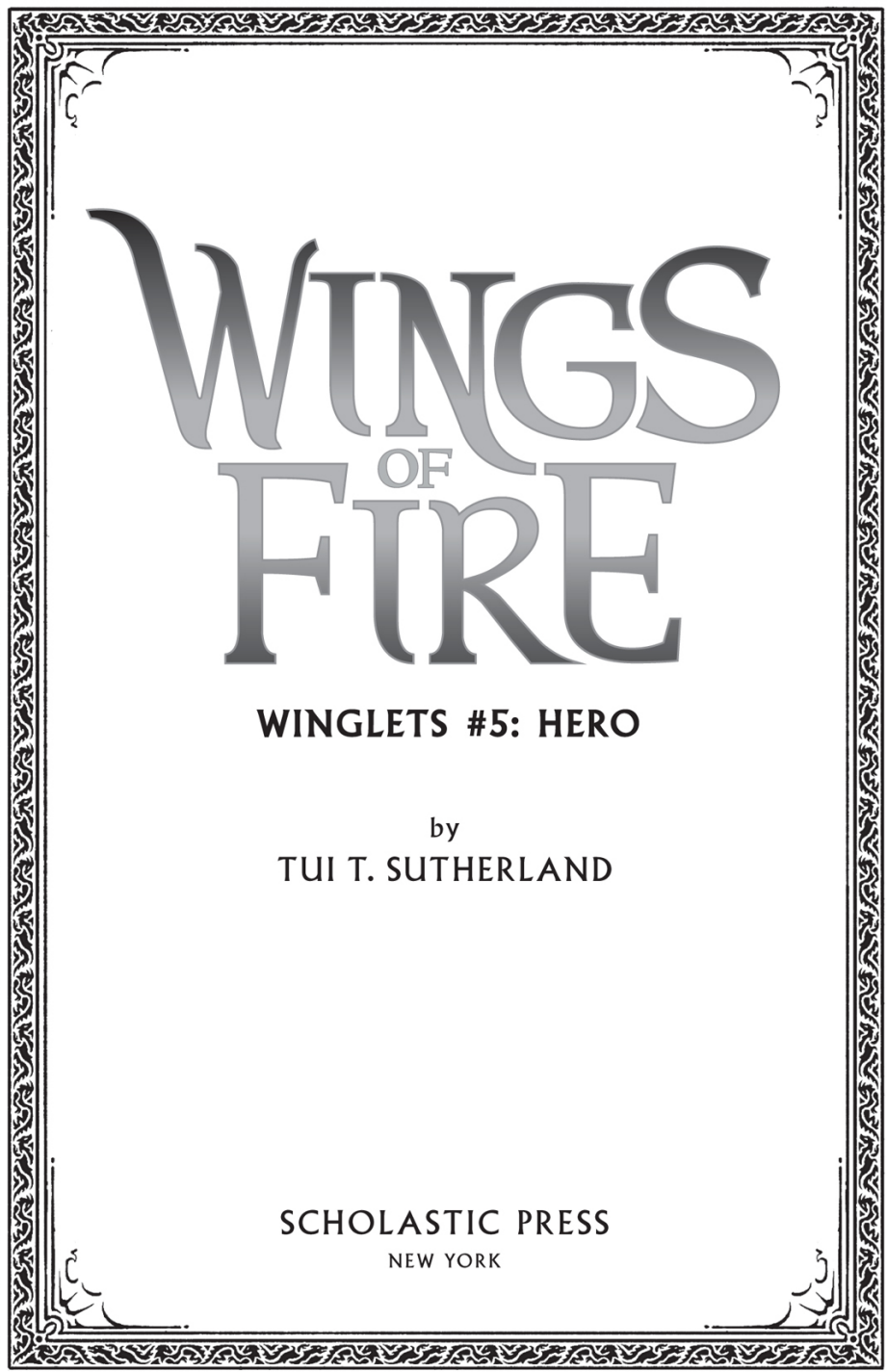
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

THE #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #5 – HERO



A decorative border with a repeating floral or scrollwork pattern, enclosing the central text area.

WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #5: HERO

by
TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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Note: The events of this story take place in the years leading up to and during Book One: *The Dragonet Prophecy*



Once upon a time ...

In a glorious kingdom full of valiant dragons ...

High upon the tallest mountain in the Claws of the Clouds ...

Deep within a grand castle ...

Lived a terrifying evil queen who struck fear into the hearts of every dragon she saw ...

and also ...

her BRAVE and AMAZING grandson, the MOST INTERESTING SkyWing prince in the HISTORY OF THE WORLD!

That's right! It's me! Prince Cliff of the SkyWings!

And this is the story of how the world got super lucky to have me — and ALMOST DIDN'T! (Gasp!)

You see, that terrifying evil queen was named Queen Scarlet of the SkyWings, and she was *very* mean and didn't like *anyone*, most especially anyone prettier than her (like my mom) or scarier than her, or anyone who might take her throne one day (like my mom!).

So she only had *one* daughter. (Well, one alive daughter.) Her name is Ruby (and she is the best mom and best dragon ever).

And Scarlet told that daughter: NO DRAGONETS.

NONE. NO ROYAL BABY DRAGONS IN THIS CASTLE.

Why? Because a granddaughter might try to take Scarlet's throne, and you can guess what Scarlet thought of that idea! (*Growl!* and *Ugh!* and *Boo*

hiss!)

But luckily for everyone, the great sky dragons in the clouds decided there was going to be *one* royal baby dragon after all.

This is how it happened ...

A Great and Inevitable Destiny Begins

On the day that changed Jasper's life, the wind was too blustery for flying lessons, so Jasper was helping the dragonets paint rocks instead.

He stepped gently around two little dragons who were painting theirs to match and paused beside a tiny scowling SkyWing.

"Oh dear," he said. "What's wrong?"

"It doesn't look like an eagle!" Garnet shouted, brushing away angry tears. "I got a *stupid* rock! It's too bumpy and it hates me!"

"Rocks can be so mean that way," Jasper said. "Let me see."

Garnet held it out on her palm. "Carnelian said it l-looks like a d-drowning chicken," she sniffled.

"It DOES," Carnelian said from beside her. "Look, it's yelling for help and it's all wet."

"NO, it's FEROCIOUS AND ABOUT TO EAT YOU!" Garnet hollered.

"Carnelian," Jasper interjected, "please go take the red paint away from the one-month-olds before they make the whole wingery look like a crime scene. But *nicely*, Carnelian."

Carnelian huffed and flounced off across the tower.

"That is clearly not a drowning chicken," Jasper said solemnly to Garnet. He picked up a blank rock and a paintbrush. "*This* is what a drowning chicken looks like." He sketched a few strokes and Garnet started to giggle.

"What would you like to do?" he asked her as he added tail feathers.

"Keep your majestic bird as is, paint over it, or try a new rock?"

"New rock, I think," she said. "Can you make it look like an eagle?"

"*You* can," he said. "Let's think about what an eagle has."

By the time parents started arriving to pick up their dragonets, there were painted rocks set out to dry on every ledge in the wingery, and Garnet had managed an eagle that even Carnelian couldn't make fun of.

"See you tomorrow!" Jasper called as each dragonet left. The other two caretakers were already yawning. Chasing dragonets who were trying to fly was exhausting, but managing their squabbles on the days they *didn't* get to fly could be even worse. "I can finish cleaning up," he offered.

"That would be blazing," Russet said. "You sure you don't mind?"

"No problem at all." Jasper waved them away. He liked being alone in the wingery after everyone left. He liked setting things back in their places and making everything feel ready for the next day. It was shaping order out of chaos, re-creating a space that was welcoming and safe for the little ones.

Besides, he had no one waiting for him back in his rooms. He'd applied for a partner and permission to have dragonets — so many times, he'd lost track of how many — but the same answer kept coming back:

REJECTED

He didn't know why. He wanted dragonets of his own more than anyone else he knew, and he thought he'd be a pretty good dad. He had plenty of experience from working in the wingery, after all. And he wasn't particular about who he'd be assigned for a partner. He usually got along with everyone — and the one dragon he thought he could love was off-limits anyway.

It was difficult and dangerous to fall in love in Queen Scarlet's palace. Everyone was too terrified all the time. Every dragon was afraid of offending the queen and being singled out for special punishment. And having someone you loved — someone the queen *knew* you loved — made that punishment too easy.

You also couldn't trust anyone, or be yourself around anyone, in case they secretly reported you. Every interaction with a stranger felt risky. *What*

are they really thinking? What if they're one of Scarlet's loyal spies? Do they secretly hate me?

At least, that's what it felt like to Jasper. It was why he preferred dragonets: they'd always tell you what they really thought. They were still able to be purely, completely happy for entire moments at a time. And Scarlet found all dragonets horrifying, so she never visited the wingery, which made it the best place in the Sky Palace, in Jasper's book.

All right, he had two theories about why his request kept being rejected.

One: he wasn't a soldier. He couldn't be a soldier, because sometimes his lungs didn't do what they were supposed to and he had trouble breathing. Scarlet would probably have thrown him in the army anyway, but Jasper had a fairly wealthy and powerful grandmother who had most likely paid his weight in gold to make sure he stayed on the exemption list. But he wouldn't be surprised if no one on the exemption list was allowed to have dragonets. That seemed like something Scarlet would do.

Or two: he had personally offended Scarlet somehow, and he just didn't know how yet. It was horribly possible. She could hold a grudge for years and exact vengeance whenever she felt like it. Most of the dragons in the Sky Palace lived in an uneasy state of not being sure whether Scarlet was angry with them.

But if either of those was the reason, there was nothing Jasper could do about it. He just had to keep trying and hoping something changed.

He gathered the paint pots into a crate and headed down the hall to the wingery supply closet. Half the toys in the closet had been made or purchased by Jasper himself. The queen allotted no gold for dragonet care out of her treasury. He was sure if anyone asked her for toys, she'd suggest the dragonets fill their time learning to fight each other instead. Definitely safer not to ask. They were lucky to even have a closet.

Jasper breathed a small puff of flame at the closet torch as he stepped inside.

"Eep!" went something at the back of the closet.

Jasper froze.

So did the something.

The closet shadows were still and silent. The games were lined up in order on the shelves. The large bundle of cloth the dragonets used to play parachute leaned against the back wall, looking extremely normal and definitely not dragon-shaped.

“Hello?” Jasper said cautiously.

No response.

There were literally hundreds of reasons why a dragon might be hiding in the wingery supply closet. Or rather, there was one reason with hundreds of minions, guards, and petty vendettas.

Jasper set his crate on the art shelf and closed the door behind him. The torchlight flickered warmly in the small space, threading hints of gold between his orange and red scales.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I won’t tell anyone you’re here.”

The parachute cloth radiated, *That would be great, if there were a dragon under here, which of course there isn’t, so no need to not tell anyone anything!*

Jasper picked up a runaway toy spatula and tucked it back into the right box. “But I should mention ... there’s another caretaker who comes in here sometimes — his name is Russet. He might come looking for something in the morning, and ... I mean, I don’t know for sure. But I think he might be a dragon who sells information for gold. Things have happened — I don’t *know* it was him — but anyway, just to warn you. You might want to be somewhere else by morning.”

A soft sigh.

Cloth rustled, quietly folded aside as the hidden dragon peeked out.

It was *her*.

Jasper’s heart stuttered, thumped around like a panicked dragonet, and threw his brain completely out of order.

The princess.

Scarlet’s daughter, her one living heir and perhaps the most forbidden dragon in the palace. Speaking to her could get you accused of conspiracy.

Becoming friends with her: probably treason.

Falling in love with her was even worse. Out of the question.
Punishable by death.

And yet ... there went Jasper's heart, where he couldn't follow.

He'd loved her when they were small dragonets, running and playing in the wingery. Back then she'd had another name and her scales had been a different color. Jasper didn't know how or why those had changed, but he knew deep in his bones that he'd better not say anything about it to anyone.

Jasper had a — well, it was a sort of oddness that he didn't want to call a "condition." He had trouble recognizing dragons by their faces. All faces looked essentially the same to him, which was a risky problem to have in the Sky Palace, where offending the wrong dragons was already so easy.

He'd developed several coping mechanisms to deal with it and keep it hidden from others. For one, he'd made a brightly colored accessory for each dragonet in the wingery, which they put on as they came through the door in the morning. The other caretakers joked about how impossible it was to keep track of all the dragonets before Jasper's brilliant idea, and the dragonets loved each having a unique treasure. Nobody guessed Jasper's secret.

He also worked hard on *noticing* ... things like scars, horn shapes, voices, and mannerisms that could help him identify a particular dragon.

And there was no one he'd noticed more than his wingery playmate. So even after she'd changed — when she somehow had different scales and everyone else called her by a different name — *he* knew it was still her. He recognized the way she tilted her head when she smiled and the up-down half flutter of her wings when she was nervous. It didn't matter whether she went by Tourmaline or Ruby. She was the dragon he loved, shouldn't love, and could never ever admit he loved.

"Princess Ruby," he said, bowing his head.

"Hi ..." she said. "Jasper?"

She remembers me. It had been so long, and who knew what had changed when she changed ... but a memory of him was still in there,

somewhere.

“That’s me,” he said. He tried to keep his voice normal. He couldn’t believe she was here, talking to him, in the same space as him. Scarlet kept her away from everyone at court. Ruby stayed tucked out of sight so no one would think, *Hmm, maybe that princess would make a better queen than the one we have*. “What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

Ruby looked down at her claws. “I made Mother angry again. I was reading and she said something and I didn’t hear her and — well, it doesn’t matter, but I just ... I was just looking for somewhere quiet to stay out of her way.” She did her nervous wing flutter and the cloth slipped toward the floor.

Jasper stepped forward and caught the parachute, gently untangling it from her wings. She took the other edge and started helping him fold it.

“I didn’t mean to mess up your closet,” she said ruefully.

“You didn’t!” he said. “Not at all. I don’t mind if you want to hide in here anytime. Although ... if you want somewhere safer — can I offer my rooms? Is that weird?”

She looked up finally, her eyes wide and startled. “That’s not safe for *you*,” she said. “Three moons, Jasper, that’s such a risky suggestion.”

“Is it?” he said. “She’d never look for you there. I’m in the wingery all day, so it would be quiet. And if I can help —” He stopped himself before he said *I’d do anything for you*.

“Thank you,” she said, lifting the last fold. “But I can’t put you in danger like that.”

Their talons brushed as he took the cloth from her, her warm scales against his. He wondered if she remembered how they used to hide under a table in the wingery, claws linked together, and whisper their ideas for a better kingdom.

“There’s another reason it would be safer than you think,” he said. “Can I show you?”

“Jasper, if anything happens to you ...” Ruby trailed off as she met his eyes. Whatever she saw there made her whole face soften, lines of anxiety

vanishing.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Just for a moment, let yourself stop worrying and come with me.”

“All right,” she said, “but you go ahead first and I’ll follow, so it doesn’t look like we’re together.”

“Plausible deniability,” he said with a grin, and she laughed.

She laughed. She does remember. “Plausible deniability” was their favorite joke when they were dragonets too small to pronounce the words correctly. They’d learned the phrase from something old Osprey said about a court case, and they were pretty sure it meant something like “at least make it LOOK like you didn’t cause this trouble.”

Once, Tourmaline had accidentally spilled an entire jug of blueberry juice all over Jasper and immediately sprinted to the other side of the wingery, shouting, “Plausible deniability! I was building this block tower and had nothing to do with it!”

“If you SHOUT it, you are making it WAY MORE UNplausibubble!” Jasper had yelled after her, laughing and dripping wet.

The smile faded from Ruby’s face and she rubbed her forehead, looking confused.

Does she remember being Tourmaline? Did Scarlet do this to her?

Jasper touched her wing with his. “If you lose me, I’ll be in the herb garden.”

She nodded, and he left the closet, blowing out the torch as he went.

Would she follow him? He didn’t let himself look back, although it was a struggle. Was she really there? Had that really happened? Would she meet him in the garden, or would she vanish back into the dark cloud of Scarlet’s wrath, too far away for him to reach?

The herb garden was a strange, walled space, open to the sky and accessible through a gate near the kitchens. Jasper didn’t know the names of all the plants growing in neat beds, surrounded by stone pathways. Some of them had borders of tiny rodent skulls, which seemed like a pretty clear sign to stay away from them. There were hedges taller than dragons all

through the garden; his best guess was that someone had grown them to make it easier to stay out of sight of anyone watching from the palace windows.

The wind rushed his face as he stepped through the gate, tugging at his wings and whipping his tail. He checked every corner of the garden, breathing in the sharp scents of basil, mint, rosemary, and darker green smells. Empty. Quiet, but in a heavy, ominous way. The kitchen dragons gathered herbs around dawn and then usually stayed far away from this place, if they could. It wasn't a friendly garden. Some of them whispered that it was haunted.

Jasper circled back to the gate just as Ruby came through. She looked up at the clouds scudding across the sky and shivered.

"This way," Jasper said softly, tilting his head.

A tall hedge along one of the side walls, out of sight of any castle windows. A gap just big enough for a dragon to squeeze behind it. And between the hedge and the wall, well hidden from anyone watching: a rock that, rolled aside, revealed a hole in the earth.

Jasper ducked into the hole and crawled through the tunnel. It was big enough for a dragon much bigger than him, though not big enough to stand up and walk through, and he'd taken care to keep the dirt dry and well-packed since he'd found it.

It wasn't long before the tunnel sloped up and suddenly ended in a small space with rock overhead.

"Where are we?" Ruby whispered behind him.

"We're going up," he whispered back. He reached up to the loose slab of stone above his head and carefully lifted it up and to the side. He scrambled after it and turned to help Ruby climb up behind him.

"Watch your head," he said, putting one of his talons between her and the shelves before she bumped into them. She stepped closer to him in the small, dimly lit space, her wings pulled in. He slid the stone back into place and opened the curtain.

“Oh,” she breathed, peeking out into his workroom. “This is where you live?”

“Yeah. Sorry it’s a mess,” he said. Most dragons in the Sky Palace had two rooms: one for sleeping and one adjoining that was for cooking, eating, and hosting guests. Jasper never had guests — he wasn’t sure anyone did, with Scarlet as queen — so he’d converted his extra space into a workroom for building toys and fixing whatever the dragonets broke.

“It’s great,” she said, smiling at him. “I adore mess. As you can maybe imagine, I’m not allowed any mess of my own, so I’m wildly envious of anyone else’s.” She crossed the room and trailed her claws along a table scattered with gears, half-carved blocks of wood, and patched-up stuffed animals that vaguely resembled mountain goats.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Always,” she admitted ruefully.

Jasper crossed to his fire pit, thanking the sky dragons that he’d been out gathering the day before, and arranged a squirrel and a talonful of nuts to roast.

When he turned around, Ruby was curled on his couch, her head resting on the gold-patterned cushion he’d spent too much on, mostly because the dragonflies on it reminded him of Tourmaline’s drawings. Her eyes had a spark of curiosity in them that he hadn’t seen in years. She looked like a princess from a fairy tale, enchanted but still the sweet, funny, real dragon he knew underneath the spell.

“So, Jasper,” she said, “*why* do you have a secret passage to the herb garden hidden in your closet?”

“I have no idea,” he admitted. “I didn’t put it there. I found it when I moved in — I assume whoever lived here before me made it. Dug it? Dug it sounds funny.”

“Why would someone dig a secret tunnel to the herb garden?” Ruby asked. “Never mind, that’s a silly question. It must have been so they could escape the palace if Scarlet ever locked them in here. Pretty smart, to install an escape route.” She glanced around. “Whoever it was probably knew

they'd need one eventually. Scarlet always puts dragons she's suspicious of in the rooms with no windows, like this."

"Do you think she's suspicious of *me*?" he said, nearly dropping the apple he was cutting up.

"No, no," Ruby said. "She has no idea who you are. I saw your name on a list once and asked about you, and she yelled at me not to bother her about nobodies." She winced. "I mean, not that you're a nobody. I'm sorry."

"I would *much* rather be a nobody to Queen Scarlet," he said. "Was it, um ... was it a list of dragons who aren't allowed to have dragonets, maybe?"

"Yes," she said hesitantly. "I'm sorry, Jasper. I can't explain anything she does."

"You don't have to," he said. He brought the apples over and sat on the floor beside her. "You're trapped in her claws just like the rest of us. But one day you'll be queen, and then you can fix everything."

"Three moons," she said with a startled laugh. "You can't say things like that! Long live the queen forever and ever and so on. Besides, I'd have to challenge her to make that happen, and I'm *never* going to do that." She shuddered.

So there's one thing that's different, Jasper thought. Tourmaline used to talk about challenging the queen all the time. She loved imagining all the ways she'd make the kingdom better once she was in charge.

He'd known there must have been magic involved in changing Tourmaline to Ruby, but this was a clue that the magic came from Scarlet somehow. This magic had changed Ruby's scales *and* her dreams.

My poor friend.

Jasper took one of Ruby's talons and rested his face in her palm. "Don't challenge her," he said. "Please stay alive. That's the most important thing."

"Even though the kingdom needs a new queen?" she said softly. "Someone braver than me?"

"She won't live forever," he said.

They were both silent for a moment, perhaps thinking of a world with no Scarlet in it. The fire crackled softly; there was no trace of the howling wind off in the distance.

“It’s so peaceful in here,” Ruby said. She closed her eyes. “It feels like the rest of the palace is so far away.”

“They are,” Jasper said. “Ruby, you can come here anytime. No one will know if you come through the secret passage. I promise it’s safe and no one will find you. I — I want you to have a safe place to hide from her.”

“Not allowed,” she said sleepily. “No friends for Ruby.”

“I’m your friend,” he said. “No matter what she does.”

There was a quiet, comfortable pause.

“I love dragonflies,” she murmured after a while.

“I know,” he said.

Her breathing steadied as she drifted into a deep sleep. Jasper held her talon for a moment longer, wishing he could do more — wishing he could really protect her from the queen and all the danger of being Scarlet’s only heir.

Then he got up, found his favorite cloud-gray wool blanket, and tucked it gently around her.

A Hero Is Hatched

Ruby tried not to dance along the corridor. That would be *very* suspicious; Scarlet’s daughter was *never* supposed to be happy about anything.

Sometimes, when she worried she might be letting her guard down, she practiced her subdued look in the mirror. Downcast eyes, blank expression. *This is not a dragon with a secret love, no way. This dragon obeys her mother and has no particular thoughts of her own. She wouldn’t dare have joy in her life.*

It seemed to be working; Ruby and Jasper had kept their secret for years. Nobody suspected Scarlet’s mousy daughter of sneaking around. And

the war kept Scarlet busy — the war and her awful arena of death.

Who cared what Ruby was up to? Who would even notice her visiting the hatchery now and then, just to glance over all the palace eggs? Not to check on one in particular, of course. It was only one small egg among all the many SkyWing eggs. Small, harmless, perfect.

And when it hatched, Jasper could claim the dragonet as his and say the mother had died in the war. No one had to know it was Ruby's.

Such a smart plan, Ruby thought as she turned into the hatchery and ran straight into the queen.

She stumbled back, pinned under her mother's yellow-eyed glare.

"Ruby," Queen Scarlet said menacingly.

"H-hi, Mother," Ruby said. She ducked her head. "What are you doing here?"

"What are *you* doing here," her mother growled. Horribly, it didn't sound like a question. It sounded like a formality before a ritual murder.

"N-nothing — nothing important," Ruby said. "Just visiting the hatchery. On a walk around the palace. Which is a thing I do. Sometimes. For, um, the exercise." *Shut up, shut up.* "Here, the kitchens, the library, just, you know, walking."

"Oh, really? Tell me ... why would you be interested in the palace eggs?" Scarlet asked. Her tail flicked slowly back and forth, tiny gold chains clinking along her spine. "I mean, you couldn't be foolish enough to want one for yourself ... could you?"

"No, no," Ruby said quickly. Her heart was pounding so hard she felt like her legs wouldn't be able to keep holding her up. She had to talk her way out of this. She had to be so convincing. "I know the rules, I promise. I just like how quiet the hatchery is. I know I can't have an egg of my own. Of course. Absolutely."

"That's right," Scarlet said. "So you couldn't *possibly* be interested in any *particular* egg in here."

"Why would I be?" Ruby said faintly. Her bones were starting to scream *too late, too late*.

“Such as, for instance ...” Scarlet held one talon out to the side and another dragon appeared from behind her to place an egg in it. “This one.”

Ruby’s egg. She would know it anywhere. Even if she hadn’t recognized the pattern of copper flecks that dotted its pale white surface, she could *feel* that it was hers at some level deep below her scales.

Scarlet smiled darkly at the look on Ruby’s face.

“Who — why —” Ruby started.

“This helpful hatchery watcher,” the queen said, flicking her wing at the dragon beside her. “He works for me. And his entire job is to tell me if a strange egg shows up in the night, or if my disobedient daughter starts coming around for mysterious visits. *Especially* if those two things happen at the same time.”

The hatchery worker gave Ruby an agonized, apologetic look. A part of her felt sorry for him, but a much bigger part of her felt intensely betrayed. He’d been friendly when she visited, nodding at her from across the hatchery as she walked around it. He could have ignored her presence and the egg she’d smuggled in. No matter how Scarlet controlled him, he could have kept Ruby’s secret.

But he’d chosen not to. He’d handed her baby right into Scarlet’s vicious claws.

“You are an idiot, Ruby,” said the queen. “Who is the father?”

“No one important,” Ruby said. “I’m sorry, Mother. Please, *please* don’t hurt my egg.”

“That’s hilarious,” Scarlet said. “Obviously I’m not letting you *keep* it.”

“But it’s a boy,” Ruby said desperately. “Just a little prince. A dragonet who’ll never be able to challenge you. I’m sure of it.” She wasn’t, of course — there was no way to be sure, unless you had the SeaWing animus-touched treasure that could predict it. But it was her only hope.

“You can’t possibly know that,” Scarlet said. “What a desperate, absurd thing to say.”

“I think it is,” Ruby said. “It might be.” She took a deep breath. “And if it isn’t a boy — if I have a female dragonet — you can kill me and let her

be your one living heir instead.”

The queen squinted at her. Ruby wasn't sure she'd ever seen her mother look puzzled before. A moment later, the expression was gone and Scarlet's face settled into her usual contemptuous sneer.

“*Really*. You would sacrifice yourself for a pointless dragon you've never even met?”

“I would,” Ruby said. “And wouldn't you rather have a newly hatched dragonet as your heir?”

“That is appealing,” Scarlet said thoughtfully. “I could train her to be smarter than *you*. That wouldn't be difficult.”

Ruby shivered, trying not to imagine what that life would be like for a little dragon.

Maybe Jasper could steal her away and escape.

As long as my dragonet lives, there's still hope. Anything is possible.

She held her breath, watching her egg teetering in her mother's talons.

Finally Queen Scarlet snorted. “Very well. It is kind of a thrilling gamble. Amusing either way. Let's roll these unnecessary dice and see if you live or die.”

She tossed the egg casually back to the hatchery worker, but Ruby lunged forward and caught it before he could. She cradled her egg to her chest, hoping her dragonet could somehow feel how much she loved it.

“I suppose I can go tell Peril her services aren't needed here after all,” Scarlet said with a dark chuckle. She regarded Ruby for another long, scornful moment. “Absolutely pathetic,” she said at last, and swept out of the hatchery.

“I'm sorry, princess,” the hatchery worker whispered as soon as the queen was gone.

Ruby turned away from him and carried her egg to a nest in the far corner of the room. She set it gently among the warm rocks and kept one talon on it, using the other to wipe her tears away.

“You'll be all right,” she murmured. “I'm here. And she doesn't know about your dad. We'll protect you, little one.”

It felt like an empty promise, with Queen Scarlet's power looming over her whole life.

Maybe we should steal you and run away now.

She didn't know where they would go ... the Talons of Peace, maybe?

Ruby glanced around and saw the hatchery worker over by the entrance. He'd been joined by two soldiers, and she realized with a sinking heart that of course Scarlet would expect her to try to run, and of course she would put loyal guards in the way to stop her.

And she has her pet monster standing by to burn my egg if I try. Just like she burned all those eggs that should have hatched on the brightest night.

The brightest night was almost seven years ago. If the prophecy was real, the dragonets who were going to save the world should be showing up soon.

Maybe they would change everything. Maybe they would do whatever they were going to do in time to save Ruby and her egg.

Ruby would have to wait ... and hope.



Ruby's egg hatched on an unusually freezing night. The air smelled like snow, and the cold wind rattled through the open palace windows and skylights, howling through the central tower. Fires were lit in hollows around the hatchery to keep the eggs warm.

The only good thing about Scarlet knowing about Ruby's egg was that Ruby could be there when it hatched. She stayed curled up beside it the whole day, resting her chin on her front talons and watching as it rocked and little cracks appeared in the shell.

"Well?" The queen's voice echoed through the space, as cold as the air above the clouds. Scarlet strode through the hatchery, carelessly whacking into other eggs with her tail as she paced by. She stopped next to Ruby and

looked down her nose at the egg. “This is taking forever. You made a slow one, no surprise.”

“There,” Ruby whispered. A little claw had poked through one side. Ruby reached out and gently touched it with one of her own.

Please don't let this be the only moment I have with my dragonet.

“Come on out!” Scarlet demanded. “We all want to know if your mother gets to survive the night, little dragon.” She grinned at Ruby with all her teeth. “The suspense! So thrilling!”

Ruby didn't say anything. She felt like she was floating away from some former version of her. *That* Ruby could only ever think about what her mother wanted and what her mother thought of her and whether she was in trouble. *This* Ruby had someone else to care about, someone who needed her — someone who mattered so much more.

The egg shivered and bits of shell started falling off as the dragonet inside clawed its way out.

Crack and crack and crack and ...

Her dragonet was free.

And he was perfect.

He shook himself vigorously and looked up into Ruby's eyes, and she knew immediately that he was going to be the smartest, most handsome, most talented, astonishing, heroic dragon who had ever lived.

He beamed at her.

“Hi, baby,” she whispered, holding out her talons so he could climb into them.

“Yawn,” Scarlet said. “Well, that's disappointing. We could have had such a grand execution right here. Blood splattered all over the hatchery! It would have been lovely and dramatic.” She snorted. “Fine, whatever. You can keep your boring little prince, *for now*, as long as he doesn't annoy me.”

Scarlet turned and swept out of the hatchery, dismissing the guards at the door with a wave of her talon.

Ruby cuddled her dragonet close, not quite believing what had just happened. There'd been a part of her that was sure Scarlet would kill one or both of them no matter who came out of the egg.

She must really think I'm no threat at all, Ruby thought. Even after I disobeyed her. She thinks she doesn't need to spend one extra moment worrying about me or what I might do, because she knows I'm always too scared to do anything.

"Gop," the little prince said confidently. He reached up and bonked her snout. "Yob gob skobble flonk GIBBLE bargle smig! GaBLEEble!"

Ruby laughed. "Exactly!" she said to him. "That's what I was thinking."

"Yarblearblegibble!" he added, flapping his wings.

"That's such a good point," she said. "You're the smartest baby ever." She squeezed him and he squawked in protest. "Do you want to know your name, smartest baby ever?"

"Flobbleskobble!" he suggested cheerfully.

"Close," she said. "We've decided to call you Cliff. Prince Cliff. Do you like it?"

"Meh," said the prince. His stomach went RRRRROWR and he gave her a pitiful wide-eyed expression.

"Yeah, we can fix that," she said, giggling. "Let's go to the kitchens. Maybe there will just happen to be a very kind wingery caretaker there with some extra snacks for you."

She tucked him into one of the hatchery slings as he flailed around, burbling energetically, and she felt like her heart was expanding to fill her whole body.

Maybe Mother is wrong about me.

Maybe she can't see how Jasper and Cliff have changed me — and will keep changing me.

Maybe one day I won't be scared of her at all.

And Now Back to ME, the Original Actual Teller of This Story!

“Mommy! MOMMY! Moooooom MomMomMomMommyMommy!”

I burst through the doorway to our rooms and threw myself at her legs and climbed right up to her shoulder and yelled “MOMMY!” one more time in her ear, just to make *extra* sure she was listening.

“Oh my goodness, Cliff,” she said, lifting me back down to the floor and crouching to put her face on the same level as my face. (I like it when she does that.) “What is it? What are you so excited about?”

“There are WEEEEEEIRD dragons in the castle!!” I announced. “So weird! One of them is a billionish millionish colors! All the colors at once! Colors I never even seen before! Like PINK and GREEN and GREENISH PINK and PURPLEY-ORANGEY-MOFF!”

“What?” she said.

“And another one has BLACK scales! Isn’t that SO cool?”

“A NightWing?” she said. “Really? Here?”

“In the arena!” I said. “Grandma brought them in this morning all covered in chains. He’s a PRISONER and he’s gonna have to whap whap stab punch whoosh fire smash somebody!”

“Wow,” Mommy said faintly.

“AND there’s a *little* one who is *kind* of a SandWing but she’s extra yellow and her tail is all wrong! How do you think she got like that? She’s really nice. I hope *she* doesn’t have to whap whap fire smash battle anybody, because I thinks maybe she wouldn’t be so good at it.”

“Wait,” Mommy said. “How do you know she’s really nice? You didn’t talk to her, did you?”

“Why not?” I demanded. “She was all alone! In a cage! And she heard me singing and she said my song was awesome! So she’s smart, too!”

“But the queen —” Mommy started.

“She wasn’t there!” I bristled. “I didn’t bother her! I wouldn’t! I’s way smarter than that!”

“OK, all right, I know,” she said, patting my head. “I’m just making sure. So, a NightWing, a RainWing, and a funny-looking SandWing. I wonder where she caught them and why she’s digging up weird dragons.”

“Thrush said there was a MudWing and a SeaWing with them, too,” I told her. “But they’re just normalish and boring. We see those *all* the time.”

“Wait.” Mommy sat up and looked out the window. “A MudWing, a SeaWing, a NightWing, and a SandWing ... are you sure there wasn’t a SkyWing with them?”

“I don’t know! I didn’t get to watch them get here because I knew Grandma was coming back so I’s hiding from her.” I bounced to my feet. “Want me to find out? I could go invesmagate!”

“Definitely not,” Mommy said. “I’ll ask around and see what’s happening.”

“Then you have to tell me!” I said. “Promise!”

“I *will*,” she said. “But you’re supposed to be in the wingery right now. How did you escape?”

“Same way as always,” I said, grinning. Mommy acts like she’s mad when I run off and explore, but *I* think *she* thinks I’m actually *very* clever and also too smart to get into *big* trouble, which is true. For one thing, I have figured out what Grandma smells like so I can run away if she’s close by and I also have hundreds of super great hiding spots all over the Sky Palace. I’m the MOST stealthy when I want to be! (Which is not most of the time because mostly I want everyone to notice me and watch me and pay attention to me, but not if they are Grandma!)

“I’m going to walk you back right now,” she said.

“OK,” I agreed. I actually liked the wingery a lot and had lots of friends and could *almost* fly already even though I was one of the littlest ones there. But I also sometimes wanted to see more things! (Like weird extra dragons in the castle! I mean, Thrush couldn’t just tell us he saw weird dragons arriving and then think I WOULDN’T go looking for them!)

“Mommy,” I said, pouncing on her tail as she headed to the door. “I have another guess!”

“But you know I’m not going to tell you if you’re right,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “Not YET. But ONE day you’ll tell me, won’t you?”

“I hope so,” she said.

“OK,” I said. “Ready? Is it ... Osprey?”

She started giggling, which is my super favorite thing, when I can make her laugh like that. (Which happens a lot, because I am VERY funny.)

“*Cliff*,” she said. “Osprey was already ancient when I was *your* age!”

“Oh,” I said. “Isn’t you ancient? I thought you were the same age-ish.”

“Three moons,” she said. “No honey apples for you for the rest of the month!” (But she was making her “Cliff is so silly” face, so I knew she didn’t mean it.)

“Then is it ... Russet?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “I’m sorry, Cliff. I just really want to keep your dad safe.”

“I know,” I said. “I hopes it not Russet. He took Sunset’s candy away just because she sneezed on him! So mean! She didn’t do it on *purpose*.”

“Oh dear,” said Mommy.

“I hope it’s Jasper,” I said, trotting along next to her. “He the nicest dragon in the *whole* castle. Apart from you, I mean.”

She gave me a funny smile. “Aww,” she said. “That’s very sweet, lovebug.”

Silly Mommy. I was mostly totally almost completely sure my dad *was* Jasper, because every time I said something like that about him, she made that same mushy face. Also he was definitely extra nice to me, which nobody else probably even noticed because he was so nice to everyone, but *I* could tell he always spent extra time saying “oooo wowwww” at my drawings and “*amazing*” at my songs and catching me during flying practice.

“Yeah,” I said, doing one of my dance walks I invented as we went down the hall. “He’s pretty great.”

The rest of that day was kind of normal but after that all SORTS of wild sparky things started happening, and I missed almost ALL of it because whenever that big SandWing Burn comes to visit, Mommy makes me stay in our rooms until she’s gone. (Which is fine because she is SO SCARY!

Even Carnelian is scared of her, although she says she's not, but she definitely is and Carnelian's not scared of anybody!)

There was a big celebration for Grandma's hatching day, which was another good reason to stay out of sight because dragons get very loud and annoying during parties like that, and I wasn't allowed to watch the arena fights anyway even though I am very tough and would not have been bothered at all. Mommy said that wasn't the main reason, actually, and that she was actually kind of scared that one day Grandma would get bored and make ME fight in the arena! Which, I mean, I knew I would win, maybe by doing some awesome dance moves until the other dragon gave up, but I definitely didn't *want* to have to do that because my *plan* was to use the arena for my starring performances one day and it would be sad if my big debut was as just another fighter. That's what I thought about that.

So I was in Mommy's rooms by myself making a huge battle scene with my toys when all of a sudden there was all this ROARING and SCREAMING from outside! It sounded like the whole castle was about to fall down! I ran to the window and saw a CHAOS of dragons (like at LEAST a million of them!) flying away from the arena, all crashing into one another and yelling about something.

I mean, would *you* stay in your room if you saw that? I know I said I wouldn't leave, but Mommy and I never talked about what to do if something *really* exciting happened! Like for instance everybody in the entire palace screaming and fleeing the arena like it was full of fire bombs!

Out in the hall I ran into Sunset, one of my friends from the wingery.

"What's happening?!" I shouted.

"I don't know!" she shouted back. "Why is there screaming?!"

(Sunset's dad also doesn't want her to watch the arena fights, which makes sense because *everything* makes Sunset throw up, even totally normal things like tearing apart a weasel in front of her.) (And then what happens is the dragonet who accidentally splattered the weasel's blood on Sunset gets in huge trouble and has to clean it all up which is SO GROSS

and unfair and anyway my point is she definitely would not be able to watch dragons fighting.)

“I’m going to find out,” I said to her.

“I’ll come with you!” she said, bounding after me. “Oh my gosh, do you think maybe the queen is dead?”

“Oh WOW,” I said. I had NOT thought about that at all! “No way. Nothing can kill Queen Scarlet!”

“Yeah, that’s what Daddy says, too,” Sunset agreed. “But remember that history lesson we just had?”

“Nnnnooooo,” I said.

“Like TWO DAYS AGO,” she said. “About Queen Oasis and how SHE died?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Something weird and little got her, right? A ... hedgehog! That’s right, it was a hedgehog.”

“It WAS NOT,” she said. “It was a SCAVENGER.”

“Mmm,” I said, wrinkling my snout at her. “Pretty sure it was a hedgehog.”

“You are a GOOSE,” she said. “It was a scavenger and so *maybe* a scavenger got Queen Scarlet, too!”

I scoffed at her. “No *way*.”

“*Maybe* way,” she said, stopping to stamp one of her feet.

We could see the central cavern now, where dragons were running and flying all around. Someone shouted “Where’s the queen?” and someone else was yelling about getting in formation. I realized I didn’t know where to find my mom or Jasper (who even if he turned out not to be my dad would be a really excellent good dragon to look for in a crisis, I figured). There was no wingery today because of the Hatching Day celebration, and Mommy sometimes had to be right next to Grandma and sometimes was sent off to fight and there was no way to know which would happen because Grandma was *very* unpredictable, which I have figured out is another way of saying she’s “SO GRUMPY DON’T ASK QUESTIONS.”

“I’mma go check the kitchens,” I said. Sometimes Jasper would spend his days off baking treats for the wingery, so I knew it would be a smart place to look.

“OK,” Sunset said. “I’m going up to the top to see what I can see from there!”

“Be careful!” I said.

“You too,” she called as she ran off.

“Watch out for hedgehogs!” I shouted after her.

I couldn’t smell Grandma anywhere nearby, but I kept sniffing as I ran down the spiral, just to be safe. Once I thought I saw a blue dragon fly by and I thought, *AAACK WE’RE BEING ATTACKED BY SEAWINGS!* but then there weren’t any others so maybe I imagined it. Also the noise everywhere wasn’t like smash-smash swords bashing battle yelling stuff. It was more like lots of dragons running and hiding and doors slamming, and I didn’t think Queen Scarlet would let everybody hide if we were actually attacked. (Plus SkyWings are really brave, so something else EXTRA scary must have happened!)

The kitchens smelled like burning and no one was busy chopping or stirring or all the things they usually did. I peeked around the doorway and didn’t see Jasper anywhere. But some of the cooks were standing near one of the windows, whispering to one another. Maybe *they* knew what was happening, although they probably wouldn’t tell me if I asked them.

So I snuck across the room (like I said before: the MOST stealthy!) and hid under a table where I could hear them.

“But where did she go?” one of them was saying. “Didn’t anyone see?”

“The queen or the RainWing?” said another.

“Either of them!”

“It *can’t* have been the RainWing,” a third one interrupted. “They don’t attack anyone! And they definitely can’t melt a dragon’s face! Can they?”

“I swear that’s what Boulder said,” said the second dragon. “He was looking right at her and she suddenly woke up and sprayed some kind of

terrifying substance all over the place. He said she probably killed hundreds of dragons and it was a miracle he survived.”

“Yeah, right,” said the third dragon. “Sounds like the time Boulder single-handedly defeated thirty SeaWings, his favorite definitely true story.”

“OK, maybe, but whatever she did, it scared Queen Burn away!” said the last dragon in the group, lashing her tail. “*Queen Burn*. She *shot* into the sky with all her SandWings behind her! I think that’s what scared everyone else the most.”

“Can we go back to how no one knows where Queen Scarlet is?” said the first dragon. “Isn’t that the most worrying part?”

They all went really quiet for a minute. I tried to stay quiet, too, so they wouldn’t catch me, because this was maybe the most exciting story I’d ever heard. Nobody ever told me RainWings could be terrifying! That was the total opposite of what we learned in the wingery!

While I was trying to imagine the fast-asleep rainbow dragon doing anything scary, I saw something move near the live prey pit. It was being way stealthy, just like me, so it took me a while to figure out it was a scavenger, and it was doing something with an empty potato sack.

Hm. Weird.

“What if Queen Scarlet is ... dead?” one of the cooks said in a hushed voice.

“We shouldn’t talk about that,” said one of the others, glancing around nervously.

“But if she is,” he insisted, “then —”

“Shhhh!” The others flapped their wings at him and scattered to different parts of the kitchen, so that was the end of my clever eavesdropping.

I would have run off to keep looking for Mommy, but the scavenger was being even more interesting and weird all of a sudden. It was scurrying around the grate on top of the prey pit, lowering a long thread between the bars, and wrestling with the padlock that kept the grate closed. After doing that for a bit, it kicked the padlock and made a little frustrated *grr* sound.

“What ARE you doing?” I asked.

It jumped nearly as high as I can, it was so startled, and the look on its face was SO funny.

“You don’t want to go in there!” I said. “Silly scavenger!”

“Squeak squeak squeak!” said the scavenger, flapping its little paws at me.

“I’m serious!” I said. “That’s where we keep our food! Food like YOU!” I pretended to pounce on something next to the grate. “See? We catch it, POW! And then we puts it in here, WHAM! And then later we has it for snacks! Yum!”

The scavenger blinked at me in confusion, even though I was being PERFECTLY clear.

“Do you ... *want* me to eat you?” I asked. It was kind of too big for me to eat all by myself, but I guessed I could *try*. If it would be *helpful* for some reason.

It pointed at the padlock and chattered something completely mystifying.

Sometimes when I am very confused or having other big feelings, it helps me to sing about them. I sat down and let the music come to me.

“Ohhhhh, I have a new friend who smells like meat!” I sang. “And I think he really wants me to eat — him which is weird because then he’ll be gone — and that would be a very sad end to this song!”

The scavenger started backing away, and, like, I don’t really know if their faces mean the same things as our faces, but if they do I would say it looked nervous. Which is not the right reaction to my singing, excuse me!

“Why else would a scavenger be near a pit?” I sang a little louder. “Full of food and oh my gosh that’s it!” I stood up and bounced around a little. “I bet you have friends down in that hole, and, and, and ... mole stole pole ... oh, and saving them from death is your MIIIIIGHTYYYYYY GOOOOOOOOOAL!”

OK, that was a genius song, if I do say so myself, but instead of *applauding*, the scavenger turned and bolted under the sacks to hide. Rude!

“Cliff!” said a voice behind me. “Why are you in the kitchens singing at a time like this?”

“Jasper!” I cried, running over to hug one of his legs. “I found you!”

“We have to get you somewhere safe,” he said. “No one knows where Queen Scarlet is.”

“Well, she’s not *here*,” I pointed out. “I would smell her if she was!”

“Even so,” he said, “it’s pandemonium out there and you can’t be wandering around singing at the top of your lungs.”

“I wasn’t!” I protested. “I was sitting perfectly still singing at the top of my lungs!”

“Cliff, your mother is probably looking for you and losing her mind,” Jasper said.

“Well, then, she should stay still because *I* am looking for *her*,” I said, very sensibly.

He gave me a face I get all the time, which is the old “you totally won this argument but I have to act like you didn’t because I’m the grown-up” face.

“Come on and we can find her together,” he said.

“Wait!” I said. “I have to show you something!” I ran over to the potato sacks and flung them aside, revealing the scavenger underneath. “Look what I found! And guess what I think I figured out? I think it’s trying to rescue the other scavengers from the prey pit! Did you know that could happen? Unless maybe it’s actually trying to get a pig or a goat for itself. I guess that’s possible, too. OK, it is *either* stealing prey *or* saving its friends and I think we should give it the key!” (Which was up on a hook out of my reach, by the way, if you’re wondering why I hadn’t already done that myself! I couldn’t *quite* fly that high yet.)

Jasper sighed. “If I let you give it the key, will you come with me?”

“Sure!” I said happily as he lifted the key down from its hook. “Hooray! I’m such a good helper!”

He gave it to me and I gave it to the scavenger, who nearly fell over when I put it in its paws.

“If you *are* stealing prey, don’t eat the mountain lions,” I told it. “Mom says those are Grandma’s favorite and even if she *might* be deadish or melted into a puddle of goo, we should still try not to make her mad.”

“Excellent advice,” Jasper said. “Entirely related to what *we* should be doing right now.”

“All right, all right,” I said. “Bye, scavenger! Good luck not getting eaten — or getting eaten, if that’s what you’re trying to do!”

It wasn’t until we were out of the kitchens that I thought, *Hey, maybe Sunset was right and that scavenger killed Queen Scarlet! Maybe it’s like a serial dragon killer who killed Queen Oasis and is running around trying to stab other dragons!*

Except it didn’t stab me, and it looked way too little and floppy to hurt a dragon. Oh, right, and the cooks said the RainWing did it. With scary goop! Wild!

Jasper put me on his back so we could hurry through the halls more easily. Boringly, he went straight back to Mommy’s rooms, but he was right because we bonked into her coming out of them.

“There you are!” she said. “Thank the moons! Quick, come in and hide.”

“Wait,” I said, pulling on Jasper’s ears as we went through the door. “All of us? Mommy, why are *you* hiding?”

“Because someone attacked Queen Scarlet,” Mommy said. She lifted me off Jasper’s back and curled up on the cushions with me while he closed the door. “So wherever she is, I imagine she’s *quite* furious and ready to murder anyone who comes across her path.”

“But what if she’s dead?” I asked.

“I —” Mommy stopped, blinking. “Well ... she can’t be.”

“Why not?”

“Because she can’t — I mean, she wouldn’t just — not like *that*.”

“Why not?”

“Because ...” Mommy looked at me for a minute. “I guess because I think she’s too scary to let something like a RainWing take her down.”

“That’s what everyone thought about Queen Oasis,” Jasper said. “And then a scavenger got her.”

(OK, fine, I guess Sunset was right.) (Probably a hedgehog killed some *other* dragon, though!)

Mommy rubbed her forehead.

“So,” I said, “if she *is* dead, doesn’t that mean *you* the queen now?”

That made Mommy look even *more* surprised, which was funny because I thought that’s what she was surprised about in the first place.

“It’s true,” Jasper said. “There’s only one heir. No one else to try and start a new war over the throne, thank the moons.”

“Although ...” Mommy said. “We should be careful of Burn. She might try to take charge of our armies. She *will* try to; that’s exactly what she would do.”

“So you tell her NO,” I said, bopping Mommy’s neck with my fists. “No! That NOT yours! It MY turn!”

Mommy tipped her head at Jasper and he said, “We’re working on using appropriate language around toy sharing in the wingery. It’s ... an evolving process.” Whatever that means.

Then he added, “But Cliff’s right. If you want to keep our armies safe, you have to make sure *you* control them. Not Burn, who won’t care if they all end up dying for her.”

“This is madness,” Mommy said. “Scarlet isn’t dead. I’m *not* queen.”

“But if she *is* and you *is*,” I said, “I is thinking maybe you should go check? And maybe sit on your throne before someone else does? Sunset sits on my favorite cushion ALL THE TIME if I don’t get there early and it is SO ANNOYING.”

Mommy looked at Jasper again and he said, “I mean ... the SkyWings need a queen. Whatever has happened, they’re going to be looking for a calm, strong leader to step in.”

“That’s not me!” Mommy said. “Three moons, who are you talking about?”

He came over, sat beside her, and took one of her talons in his. “*It is* you. There’s a great queen inside you. Scarlet has done something to scare you or magic you into thinking you’re not, but *I know you*. I’ve always known you. You’ll be a brilliant SkyWing queen, and I’ve always known that.”

She made her mushiest face right back into his really really mushy face (see, I knew I was right!) and said, “I can’t believe there’s a dragon in the world who thinks that about me.”

“There is,” he said.

“There’s TWO!” I interrupted, because it was getting VERY mushy and I felt like no one had paid any attention to me in forever!

“Thank you, Cliff,” Mommy said, wrapping her arms and wings around me and squishing me close, which was more squashy attention than I was looking for. Then she handed me to Jasper and stood up. “All right. I guess I’m going to go claim my throne.”

“YES!” I shouted.

“Well, maybe,” she said. “Unless it turns out Mother is fine.” She stopped Jasper as he started to stand up, too. “And just in case — will you please stay here with Cliff?”

“NOOOOO,” I shouted.

“Just until I know for sure what’s happening!” Mommy said. “Calm down, Cliff.”

“OK,” I said. “You go be queen and Jasper can make me a snack.”

She smiled, took a deep breath, and swept out of the room in a really totally queenlike way. (I think. I’s only seen scary queens before that, so seeing a pretty awesome and nice one was kinda different, but she seemed very queenish to me.)

Jasper and I looked at each other.

“Wow,” he said.

“*I knew* you were my dad,” I said.

He laughed. “Well, Ruby did mention that you’re the smartest dragonet who’s ever lived. We should have known you’d figure it out.” His face got

serious again. “But maybe still keep it a secret until we know for *sure* for sure if Scarlet is dead, OK?”

“OK,” I said. “Snack?”

“Snack,” he said, and then he picked me up and hugged me, in a real dad way, and I didn’t mind one bit.



And that is the story of how Prince Cliff of the SkyWings, future hero of the world, was hatched!

See, isn’t it GREAT that I came along despite how dangerous it was to have me? Don’t you think the SkyWings must have a big destiny planned for me? And did you see how I convinced Mommy to go be queen? That was pretty useful of me, right?

So now she is Queen Ruby and everything in the whole Sky Kingdom is much better and we are all going to live (ready?) ...

HAPPILY EVER AFTER!

Hooray!

The End (for now!)

Turn the page for a sneak peek at the sixteenth book in the Wings of Fire series, *The Hybrid Prince*!



PROLOGUE

*Over three thousand years ago
in the forests bordering the Beetle and
Leaf Kingdoms on Pyrrhia ...*

“I don’t see anything,” Sorrel whispered.

“Keep your eyes on that cloud,” Darkling whispered back. “They’ll come from there.”

Sorrel shifted his claws on the branch, flicking rain off his tail and his long, leaf-shaped wings. They’d been waiting in the misty drizzle for hours as the sun set and the sky went from pale gray to dark purple. There were so many gloomy clouds bunched together overhead that Sorrel had no idea which one Darkling meant or why she was so sure that was the one to watch.

And then — movement.

Darkling was right. Two dragon shapes dropped swiftly, silently from the clouds into the forest, barely flickers of shadows. Easy to miss if you weren’t watching.

“They know about Harmony,” Darkling said. “Come on.” She leaped down to the forest floor, her BeetleWing scales shiny with raindrops, and Sorrel followed. Dread simmered through him. If other tribes had found out about the hidden village in the forest ... did they also know what Queen Euphoria and Queen Magnolia were planning? And if so, what would they do about it?

The sounds from the village were sleepy and peaceful, no louder than the rustling trees or chirping frogs around them. Darkling paused on the outskirts, scanning the shadows, then caught Sorrel’s eye. After a moment,

he saw them, too: two dragons perched like vultures in one of the vast oaks, peering down. The NightWing was barely visible, and the SkyWing beside him was so still she seemed like a strange, twisted branch of the tree.

Darkling and Sorrel crept closer, and gradually Sorrel's ears picked up their whispers.

"See?" hissed the NightWing. "Look at this abomination. BeetleWings *and* LeafWings, which is bad enough, but look closer, Precipice. This place has fugitives from *every* tribe." Sorrel recognized Bloodshed's voice and his heart sank even further.

"Seems like a violation of the Accords," the SkyWing agreed. She angled her head toward the village. A glimmer of moonlight reflected off something in her talons — one of the weird little things Precipice carried everywhere.

"It's grotesque," Bloodshed growled.

"It's illegal," Precipice said in a measured voice. "We have to tell the other Queens' Claws."

"We can't trust Sorrel or Darkling." Bloodshed lashed his tail. "They kept this from us. They know what their queens are up to. They must be punished."

"I'm sure the other Claws will agree," Precipice said.

Sorrel shivered. This was bad. There were nine dragons in the council of the Queens' Claws, one representing each tribe. They kept the peace by shaping and upholding the Accords of Dragonkind. If Bloodshed and Precipice thought the village was illegal ... then Darkling and Sorrel would have to work fast to get the other tribes on their side, if they could.

But the village doesn't break the Accords, Sorrel thought, his claws sinking into the damp moss below him. It's not hurting anyone. Harmony is just a safe place for any dragon to live. What's wrong with that?

"This place undermines all of us." Bloodshed pointed a claw at one of the village houses. Outside it, a small white dragonet with leaf-shaped wings was playing with a blue-and-gold BeetleWing. An older dragonet,

pale green with icicle spikes around his head, was sorting berries while he watched them.

“For example, I’m sure the IceWings would be *very* interested to know where that banished family went,” Bloodshed said viciously. “They were supposed to suffer and die outside the Ice Kingdom. Not cozy up to *LeafWings* and live happily ever after in a forest village full of monsters.”

Sorrel had been with Queen Magnolia the day two desperate IceWings came to her, pleading for refuge in the Leaf Kingdom. What was she supposed to do — drive them out? Kill them herself? She wasn’t that kind of queen. Of course she had let them stay.

And then of course other dragons had followed, drawn by the promise of safety. That was all they wanted.

Sorrel didn’t understand how anyone could look at Harmony, at these peaceful dragons living together and taking care of one another, and see a threat.

“My queen may not care,” Precipice said pensively, “as long as the SkyWings here never try to return to our kingdom.” She turned the object in her talons over, adjusting something without looking at it. She always did this at their meetings, too; her claws needed things to hold or move or work on while she thought.

Maybe we can talk to Precipice. Sometimes she listens. If we get her away from Bloodshed and tell her our side ... maybe there’s a chance.

“Your queen *should* care,” Bloodshed spat. “This is only the beginning. Euphoria and Magnolia have bigger, more dangerous plans.”

He knows, Sorrel thought with a stab of despair. He’ll turn them all against us.

“Like what?” Precipice asked.

“Shhh,” said the NightWing, and they fell silent for a long moment. Sorrel stopped himself from shivering. He was behind the dragons, pressed into a hollow between tree roots on the forest floor. There was no way Bloodshed could know he and Darkling were there.

Unless he’s been a mind reader all along without telling us.

But he couldn't be. One of the rules of the Accords was that the NightWings couldn't appoint a mind reader to the Queens' Claws. No animus dragons or flamescales or leafspeakers were allowed either. And none of them could use any of their regular powers during their meetings. That was only fair.

Finally Bloodshed spoke, his voice laced with quiet menace.

"I'll tell you somewhere safe," he said. "But trust me, both tribes must be punished."

"Then we'll call for a trial, and they'll be judged by the laws of the Accords." Precipice slid her little creation into her traveling bag.

"No," said Bloodshed. "That's not enough." The NightWing hunched forward, glaring at the village. "We must burn this place to the ground."

"Not on our own," Precipice said. "We should report back to our queens and see what they want us to do."

"Fine," Bloodshed spat. "But no matter what the other tribes say, these dragons cannot be allowed to survive."

In a span of heartbeats, with a muffled snap of wings, they were gone.

Sorrel turned his head quietly to look at Darkling. She was crouched in the shadow of the oak, angry tears in her eyes.

"We'll get to the other Claws before they do," he said. "I'm sure we can get the RainWings on our side. The SeaWings, too, I think."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. You heard Bloodshed. He's not going to worry about the law or getting the queens to agree. He's going to come back with an army to kill everyone in Harmony." She flared her venom-tipped claws and hissed softly. "But he'll have to go through me."

Sorrel dug his talons into the carpet of moss underfoot. "What if we hide them instead? So there's no one here when the army comes? We can send them somewhere safe."

"Where?" Darkling demanded. "There *isn't* anywhere to hide from the queens on this continent."

"Then maybe there's somewhere else," Sorrel said. The drizzle was turning to rain, slipping wet tendrils between his scales. "Not on this

continent. A safe place far away from the queens who want to kill them.”
He took one of Darkling’s cold talons in his.

“We just have to find it.”



CHAPTER 1

My sister is a murderer.

Lightning flashed all around Umber, flickering inside the clouds like a battlefield full of smoke and dragon fire. The rain hadn't started yet, but the air was heavy with the scent of it.

She killed two dragons while trying to kill another. And she still kept trying?—?she wasn't going to stop, no matter how many dragons got hurt.

She's dangerous, and she's in danger. And she's my responsibility.

This was never supposed to be in Umber's talons. He was the little brother of his sibling group, the last-hatched and the smallest. He was hilarious jokes and cheerful suggestions and following orders and being agreeable. He was definitely not "shelter a murderer and figure out where she'll be safe" or "mastermind the fugitive from justice plan" or "make sure she doesn't kill again, because something's definitely wrong in there, good luck!"

But I don't have a choice.

She's my sister, and I'll do anything for her.

He could see Sora's shape winging furiously ahead of him into the darker and darker clouds. She hadn't stopped since they'd left the school, or even looked back to make sure he was behind her.

“Sora!” Umber called. “Sora, wait!”

Imagine if I lost her already. We just left the school; I just promised to keep her safe?—?and keep everyone safe from her.

He still couldn’t believe his sister?—?quiet, sad, shattered Sora?—?was the one who’d set off a dragonflame cactus that killed two students.

Why hadn’t he seen how unhappy she was?

Because she’s been unhappy for so long, he answered himself. Ever since Crane died. He’d thought the school would make everything better for all of them?—?him, Sora, and their brother Marsh. He’d dreamed about how happy they would be. They’d be with their brother Clay. They’d meet new dragons and learn how to live in peace after growing up in a world at war.

But Sora brought the war to school with her. He understood some of that?—?he missed Crane, too. If he’d met an IceWing who looked like the memory of Crane’s killer in his head, he might have snapped like Sora had.

Even then, he couldn’t imagine trying to kill someone or his next step being “set off an explosion.” He didn’t ever want to fight another battle. He definitely didn’t want to hurt anyone. He felt Sora’s grief, but he’d never understand how she could put all the other innocent dragons in danger.

I wish she’d told me. Or Clay. We could have found her a new clawmate and gotten her away from Icicle. We could have helped her find peace. I think?..?..?I hope.

Will I ever see Clay again? Or any of my other siblings?

A gust of cold, wet air knocked him sideways, spraying raindrops in his face. He righted himself, shaking his head, and spotted Sora diving toward the trees below. Was this the rainforest? He couldn’t tell how far they’d gone. He spiraled into a dive to follow her.

It took him a panicked few moments to find her; her brown scales blended with the shadows under the trees. But he heard her soft sobs below the sound of the branches thrashing, and he slipped through the undergrowth to her side.

She lifted her head as he brushed her wing, then buried her face in her talons again.

“Sora,” he said, twining his tail with hers. “Where are we going?”

“Home,” she said. She tipped her snout to give him a puzzled, tearful look. “Of course home. To Reed and Pheasant. Marsh will find us there.”

Back to our siblings. To our big brother and sister, who have always taken care of us.

“Sora, we can’t go home,” he protested.

“I know we can’t *stay* there,” she said, “but we have to go talk to them?—?to tell them?—?to explain. Then they can come with us wherever we go. We can all be together, like we should be.”

“We can’t do that to them,” Umber said, although he wanted so badly to go to Reed right now. He wanted his bigwings to say *it’ll be all right* and *I’ll sort this out, don’t worry* and *oh sure, homicidal sisters are perfectly normal, don’t fret, everyone’s got one*. But it wouldn’t be fair to Reed and Pheasant. “For one thing, they work for Queen Moorhen now?—?we’d get caught before we made it into the palace. And even if we did get to them, they should turn us in out of loyalty to her.”

“Turn *me* in,” she said, her eyes dark pools. “They wouldn’t do that.”

“You’re probably right,” he said. “But if they run off with us, they lose everything?—?and if we all get caught, they’d be in trouble, too. I don’t want to put them in danger, do you?”

“They wouldn’t *lose everything!*” she protested. “We’d have each other?—?brothers and sisters! That’s all we need!”

She wasn’t wrong. That was how MudWings lived; you stayed with your sibling group your whole life.

Umber realized he was already thinking like the other dragons at Jade Mountain. He was imagining families like other dragon tribes had, with falling in love, and dragonets you took care of, and work that wasn’t “fight a war until you die.” He’d *been* imagining it ever since he got to the school. A future with someone like Qibli, studying and maybe teaching and choosing his own path.

I'm never going to see Qibli again either.

He pushed that thought away. *That was a crush. Sora is my family.*

"You have me," he said. "I'll always be your brother. But we can't go back to the Mud Kingdom. We have to hide somewhere that the IceWings won't find us."

"It's not fair," Sora said in a trembling voice. "Icicle killed Crane and then I didn't even actually kill her and now we have to hide from her forever?"

Umber didn't know how to answer that. It wasn't only about Icicle?—? Sora had killed a SkyWing and a NightWing who had tribes and families that would want justice. Moorhen was a good queen. She wouldn't risk another war to protect Sora when Sora was guilty.

Should I convince Sora to turn herself in?

What if I did, and they executed her? I'd never forgive myself.

Sora's not evil, she's just?..?..?wounded, in a way that's hard to see.

"Maybe Clay's friend would take us in?" Sora suggested. "The one who's the queen of the RainWings now?"

Glory has to answer to her NightWing subjects, too, Umber thought. She's one of the queens who will need Sora to be punished.

"Let's find our own place," he said. "Maybe south?" *The opposite direction from the Mud Kingdom and Sky Kingdom.* "I think there are islands south of the rainforest. Maybe we can find one where we'll be safe and no one will ever know we're there."

Sora let out a long sigh. After a moment, she stood up. The rain was pouring through the trees now, sliding off leaves and sending sudden chilling cascades down Umber's spine.

"Fine," she said. "South. But I still don't think this is fair."

She took off again and he followed, trusting her uncanny sense of direction. Sora was always their navigator on long flights, but this time they were going off the map of the known world. Umber didn't know what they would find, or whether there actually were habitable islands there. He just wanted to get Sora far away from other dragons.

I'm not sure what's happening inside her head. She seemed genuinely remorseful about hurting Tamarin, and he was pretty sure she felt guilty about accidentally killing Carnelian and Bigtail. But she had still tried to kill Icicle a second time. The war was still raging in Sora's mind, and Umber wasn't sure who else she might hurt.

Somewhere far away, somewhere peaceful, where she can rest and get better. That's what they needed.

Then maybe one day they could come back, when all the war and death was far behind them, and Sora could atone for what she did.

Umber glanced over his shoulder, although the dark and the storm made it impossible to see the mountains they'd left behind. Rain pelted in his eyes as he thought of the future he'd dreamed of?—?studying with his winglet, making friends, living without the shadow of the war over everything.

That was all gone now.

He turned away and flew after Sora.



The next morning they crossed out of the rainforest and flew over a stretch of choppy water. The sky was still gray and overcast, and beady-eyed seagulls darted around them, screaming indignantly when Umber tried to catch one. He was so hungry, but Sora flew as though she had no plan to ever stop.

The southern coast of the continent rippled with inlets and wetlands full of mangroves that reminded Umber of home. But they didn't stop to sink their claws into the mud, even for a moment. They flew on, out into the wild ocean sky and over clusters of tiny islands, most of them no more than rocks.

Finally, around midmorning, they spotted a larger island covered in greenery. It was small enough that Umber could see the whole thing from the air, but bigger than the overgrown boulders they'd seen so far. He followed Sora down to land on the pebbly beach. Tiny crabs, no bigger than

the tip of his claw, darted away in a flurry of movement and vanished into the sand.

Other than that, nothing moved except the waves crashing behind them and the jungle swaying ahead of them. Tangles of vines hid the interior.

Sora flumped down and covered her head with her wings.

Is this it? Umber wondered. *Do we live here now?*

“Excellent choice. So rustic,” he tried to joke. “Great, uh??.?.?sand. Plus nonstop soothing ocean noises! Very peaceful. I always say, *any* neighbors are *too many* neighbors, am I right?”

Sora did not respond.

“Much calmer than the academy anyway?” he offered. Maybe this was what Sora needed?—?space to breathe and be alone.

Alone. Umber sighed. That wasn’t what he wanted at all. He loved other dragons; he loved meeting new ones and being in busy, noisy groups. But this wasn’t about him; this was about taking care of Sora. Although he wasn’t doing a very good job of that so far, as she still had her head under her wings and seemed to be finding him the opposite of funny.

He walked up the beach to the line of trees and peered in. Shadows, branches moving, ominous rustling. The very distinct, creeping feeling he was being watched.

As his eyes adjusted, he noticed a scratch on one of the closest trees? —?something that looked like a gouge left by a claw. He turned and saw another on a tree some distance to his right, and then another farther along.

Were there other dragons here?

He followed the clawmarks (if that’s what they were), finding one every few trees until he reached what seemed to be the halfway point of the beach. To his left, the island curved away out of sight, and to his right, a stretch of craggy rocks trailed into the ocean and cut off the view beyond.

And here, at the midpoint, the clawmarks changed. Umber felt a chill run through his scales.

There were words carved into the trees.

NOT SAFE HERE, the jagged letters read.

KEEP GOING.

Umber felt as if sharp-taloned little birds were scuttling between his shoulder blades and crawling out to his wingtips.

Who left this message? Why isn't it safe here?

Does "keep going" mean there is somewhere safe to go?

He turned and ran back to where he'd left Sora?—?but as he came closer, he realized she wasn't there anymore. The beach was empty.

"Sora!" he shouted. "SORA!"

He found the churned-up sand where they had both landed and the depression where she'd dug herself in to rest. His own talonprints were still there, heading toward the trees?..?..?and here was another patch of scattered sand as if Sora had taken off.

Did she?..?..?leave without me? He looked up, but the sky was still and overcast. *She wouldn't do that, would she?*

Something howled from deep in the jungle and Umber spun toward the trees. Maybe she'd gone in there to look for food.

He flew up the beach and crossed the tree line, shoving aside the damp branches and strangling creeper vines. It was worlds colder in the shadowy jungle. Every tree seemed to lean toward him and he kept feeling tendrils (or snakes, *it's probably not snakes don't think about snakes*) coiling around his talons as he edged farther in.

"You get it," he heard Sora say, in such a normal conversational tone that he felt off-balance for a moment. "I see what you're thinking. You'd have tried to kill her, too."

"Sora?" he called.

There was a pause, and then he heard her whisper, "*He* doesn't get it."

He followed her voice until he found her a little farther in, perched high up in the canopy, on a branch of a tree that had twisted itself around another tree until the one underneath was dead.

"It's just war, right?" Sora was saying. "They kill someone we love, now it's our turn to kill them."

"Sora, who are you talking to?" Umber asked, tilting his head back.

She glanced down at him, then flicked her tail impatiently at the canopy around her.

The shadows were full of eyes.

Eyes gleaming yellow and green in the dark, eyes that blinked slowly as they drew closer. Eyes sunk deep in shaggy skulls, glowering under heavy brows.

Monkeys? Umber thought, but these were the largest, hairiest, most sinister-looking monkeys he had ever seen?—?twice the size of Winter’s scavenger, and covered in heavy, dense gray fur. One jumped to the end of Sora’s branch, grinned down at Umber, and yawned to show off teeth as huge as a full-grown dragon’s claws. Its face was striped red and blue and its growl was low and muttering.

“My point exactly,” Sora said to it.

“Sora,” Umber said cautiously. “I think we should get out of here.” He would deal with *my sister thinks she can converse with menacing monkeys* once they were well out of range of those teeth.

“Yeah, obviously,” Sora scoffed. “This island belongs to them.” She snapped her wings out, and the gathering crowd hissed. “I’m not *rude*, I don’t *pick fights* with creatures who *haven’t* wronged me or, you know, murdered my loved ones.” She snorted and leaped into the air, flying up through the leaves into the sky.

“Come onnnn, Umber!” her voice trailed back to him.

The eyes all turned to Umber.

“Uh. Sorry,” he said, taking a step backward. He couldn’t fly out the way Sora had gone. If he tried, he’d have to go straight through the crowd of monkeys, which would make him an easy target for anything large and shaggy that felt like jumping on him and maybe biting off his ears or whatever shaggy toothy monsters liked to do.

“I’ll just...go,” he said.

One of the creatures let out an ear-piercing shriek and threw itself down the tree toward him, faster than any animal should be able to move. Umber

turned and bolted back toward the beach, tripping over every branch and smashing his head and wings into tree trunks as he tried to run.

He didn't look back, even when the howling felt as though it was right on his heels, and as soon as he hit the open beach he flung himself into the air. He hoped he was just imagining the graze of teeth against his back talons.

The trees shook with angry growls as he soared out of their reach.

Sora was up in the sky, doing little flips around a wisp of cloud.

"There's another island that way," she said, pointing. "Let's go check it out!"

Umber followed her, exhausted, his heart pounding.

Is she all right? he wondered. *That wasn't normal, was it?*

Maybe they were both just tired and overemotional. She probably didn't *really* think she'd been having a conversation with the monkeys. She didn't realize she'd left him in danger; she would never do that on purpose. *Right?*

The next island was all rocks and it was covered in angry, giant-beaked birds defending their nests. Sora and Umber circled a few times without landing, and Umber thought he saw an arrow scratched into a few of the rocks, pointing south.

The island after that looked promising at first, muddy and crisscrossed with little rivers, but as they got closer Umber spotted another message spelled out in rocks on the beach. **NOT SAFE.**

KEEP GOING.

"Sora," he said tentatively.

"I see it," she said. "Let's not land here."

"I wonder where someone wants us to 'keep going' *to*," he said.

"I guess we'll find out," she said with a shrug, which was quite a bit more casual than Umber felt about it.

They flew over three more islands (and several rock formations and a lot of ocean) with similar messages, until finally it started growing dark. Umber's wings ached and his heart ached and his stomach was *so empty*.

"I think?—?I think I need to rest," he said.

Sora pointed to a crescent-shaped island off to their right. The two arms of the island curved around a bay that glimmered with phosphorescent jellyfish and silvery reflections of the moons. The sand was soft and warm under their talons as they landed. Umber didn't see any messages, and even if there was one, he was too exhausted to "keep going" tonight.

He collapsed to the beach and dragged sand around him with his wings. Sora walked up and down the shoreline, frowning, then came over and studied the nest he was making. Finally she dug herself in next to him and rested her chin on his shoulder.

Her breathing slowed and evened out, and he felt her warmth spread through his cold scales. For a moment, he could pretend they were back in the swamps, with Marsh and Crane and Pheasant curled up beside them and Reed standing watch for any danger. For a moment, everything felt normal and safe.

He was almost asleep when he heard her whisper, "Thank you for coming with me, Umber."

This is why I left Jade Mountain Academy with her, he thought. *She's my sister and I'll always protect her. That's what brothers and sisters do.*

His heart finally calmed down, and under the rising moons, he fell asleep.

In his dreams, he walked through long empty halls in an unfamiliar place, looking for Sora?—?or Clay, or Reed, or anyone he knew. He could hear laughter echoing in the distance, but he couldn't find anyone. Room after room was empty, filled with nothing but echoes.

Something brushed his ankle, and when he looked down, he realized there were hundreds of snakes covering the floor. All at once the room was wall-to-wall snakes, slithering and hissing and sliding and winding around and around and around his ankles.

He tried to back away, to turn and run, to leap into the air, but a giant python had him in its grip, and it dragged him ruthlessly into the hissing scales. The snakes rose around him like a wave?—?like water rising, rushing into his mouth.

Umber woke up with a start, choking on seawater.

A huge tentacle was wrapped around his front leg, dragging him into the ocean.

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BOOK TWO
THE LOST HEIR

BOOK THREE
THE HIDDEN KINGDOM

BOOK FOUR
THE DARK SECRET

BOOK FIVE
THE BRIGHTEST NIGHT

BOOK SIX
MOON RISING

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ESCAPING PERIL

BOOK NINE
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BOOK TEN
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BOOK ELEVEN
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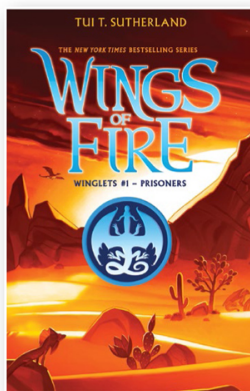
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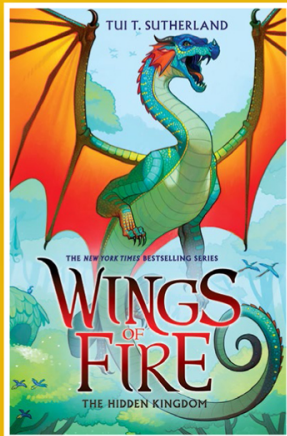
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